

MASSACHUSETTS RARE AND ENDANGERED WILDLIFE

KING RAIL (Rallus elegans)

DESCRIPTION

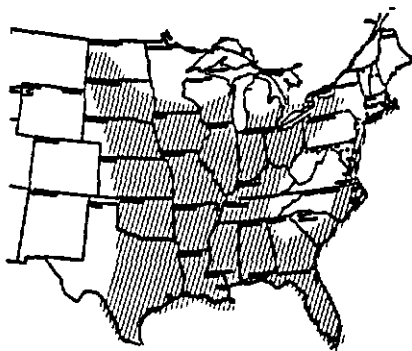
The King Rail, largest of the New England rails (15-19"/38-48 cm long), is a plump, chicken-sized marshbird. The long, slender bill curves downward and varies from orange-red to dark brown. Sexes look alike; males are usually slightly larger than females. Upper parts are rich olive-brown, distinctly streaked with brownish-black or olive-gray. Wings are brown. Over each eye a brownish-white or brownish-orange line turns to brownish-gray behind the eye. Sides of the head are dusky, bluish-ash, while the upper throat is whitish. The entire chest and sides of the neck are a deep reddish-brown. Most conspicuous of all markings is the bold white barring on the dark brown flanks and wing linings, which fades to whitish under the tail. Legs and feet vary from light reddish-brown to grayish-maroon. Wingspread is 21 to 25"/52 to 62 cm. Chicks are glossy greenish-black and downy; feet and legs are brownish-gray.



Bureau of Sport Fish and Wildlife, US Department of the Interior. Natural History of the King Rail. North American Fauna, No. 67, 1969.

SIMILAR SPECIES

King and Clapper Rails, often found together in salt and brackish marshes, are similar in plumage and habits, and have been known to hybridize where their ranges overlap. Some ornithologists disagree as to whether they are different species or merely races of the same species. The Clapper is smaller, grayer and has paler flank barring. Virginia Rails are much smaller than Kings and have gray, instead of brown, cheeks.



(continued overleaf)



- Verified since 1978
- Reported prior to 1978

Distribution of Rallus elegans

Breeding Distribution in Massachusetts
by Town

KING RAIL (continued)

HABITAT IN MASSACHUSETTS

King Rails inhabit large freshwater and brackish marshes dominated by cattails and other emergent vegetation. Members of this species are more inclined than other rails to wander onto adjacent fields.

BEHAVIOR

These secretive marshbirds often remain hidden among the dense vegetation. When flushed they fly weakly for only short distances. Males defend small strips of freshwater marshland as breeding territories.

FEEDING HABITS

In Massachusetts King Rails typically forage in shallow water, 2 to 3" deep, in areas concealed by vegetation. The preferred diet of both adults and young includes insects, slugs, tadpoles, small frogs, crayfish, grains, and seeds from aquatic plants. Most food items are ingested whole, but larger crustaceans are often dismembered before eating.

MIGRATION

As nocturnal migrants, King Rails probably arrive at nesting areas in local marshes in late April and early May, and remain until late August or early September. King Rails return to the same section of the same marsh for several consecutive years to breed; but they never return to the same nest.

BREEDING BEHAVIOR

King Rails probably nest in Massachusetts in June, on or close to the ground, weaving the nest of sedges and grasses in cattails or other dense vegetation, in the shallow part of the marsh. Occasionally, the nest (8"/20cm. in diameter) is placed on a clump of grass or on a sedge tussock about 18"/45 cm. above the water. Males appear to choose nest sites and actively participate in nest building. Usually, in the north, one clutch is laid yearly of 10-12 buffy or creamy-white, and slightly glossy, ovate-shaped eggs, speckled with reddish-brown and lilac. Incubation lasts from 21 to 23 days. Precocial young are fed the first day by parents, able to eat from the ground by the second day, and can walk one hour after hatching. Young follow their mother from the nest and remain with adults for more than a month. They remain flightless for about 9 weeks.

RANGE

The King Rail is scattered throughout the eastern half of North America, excluding mountainous areas. In general, it breeds very locally where appropriate habitat exists from Massachusetts, west to southern Ontario, southern Michigan, central Minnesota and eastern Nebraska, south along the Atlantic coast to Florida and southwest through the Great Plains, to Texas, and west along the Gulf states. The species winters or is a year round resident mainly in the southern part of the breeding range and along coastal areas. King Rails winter in salt marshes located anywhere within their range.

POPULATION STATUS

Confirmed or suspected breeding in Massachusetts has occurred at only a few widely scattered localities. King Rails are listed as "threatened" in Massachusetts; there have only been four reported sites since 1978. Since Massachusetts lies at the northern periphery of the range, King Rails, have always been rare and apparently local breeding birds in the state. Although raccoons prey upon eggs in nests, loss of wetland nesting and feeding habitat is undoubtedly the major factor threatening the King Rail in Massachusetts.